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To Soviets, there's very little difference between a Western reporter and a spy

By Louis Halasz 5

What is the difference between a Western journalist and a spy? Nothing, if you accept the Soviet interpretation. All the world, if you believe President Reagan, who has tried to assure Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev that Nicholas S. Daniloff, Moscow correspondent for *U.S. News & World Report*, is an innocent newsman, not engaged in espionage.

The Daniloff case has lit up the chasm that exists between Western and communist understandings of what news reporting is about. Reporters from both sides of the fence have common professional interests and worries: they want to be free to pursue their stories; they want their word processors to work; they want the satellite transmission to go smoothly; and, of course, they want their respective editors to print whatever they send.

But the product they turn out could not be more different. The reporter working for a medium in a capitalist country is, or at least wants to be, in pursuit of objective truth; the newsman engaged by a government or party organ run on the principles of Marxism-Leninism wants to promote the cause.

Both believe in what they are doing, and if you are working in close proximity with colleagues from the other side, as I have for some three decades within the confines of the United Nations, you develop good professional relations by agreeing to disagree, and letting it go at that.

From the Soviet point of view, one does not have to be the devil's advocate to argue that Mr. Daniloff, and all of us working in Western journalistic vineyards, are spies. In fact, one could make a case in praise of Soviet restraint: the arrest of Nick Daniloff for espionage was the first time an American reporter working for a non-communist publication ever ran into so much trouble in the Soviet Union.

According to Article 65 of the Soviet criminal code, "the transfer to . . . a foreign organization . . . of information constituting a state or military secret" calls for imprisonment, exile or even the death penalty.

What constitutes a state or military secret is determined by the Soviet authorities. According to Gennady F. Gerasimov, spokesman for the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Mr. Daniloff "has been collecting information about Soviet military forces and installations, nuclear energy centers and radioactive waste sites." This, according to the government organ, *Izvestia*, means that Mr. Daniloff, "using the status of a foreign correspondent, [was] engaged in espionage [by] gathering secret data in various ways for the detriment of the national interest of the Soviet Union."

"It is true that I have written on atomic energy," said Mr. Daniloff, talking to his colleagues in a press conference a week ago. "I have written on atomic energy before Chernobyl, and so have you. It's true that I have written on Afghanistan. No doubt you have as well. Recently our magazine had a cover story on the American Navy. I was asked to contribute an article on the Soviet navy, so I did write on some military topics."

But he took great pains to stress that he had "no official or secret relationship with any intelligence agency," adding that "everything that I have done in the U.S.S.R. has been on my personal initiative or on the request of my magazine." Consequently, as he saw it, he was only "doing journalistic activity [by] digging deeply — as I am sure that you also dig."

The reporter's duty, as we see it in the West, is to go after the facts without fear or favor, setting aside all biases and political convictions as far as humanly possible, to report all of the facts, hope they will get printed, and let the chips fall where they may.

In this endeavor, every one of us, on occasion, enters the shadowy world of intelligence gathering. Quite often our findings are being used by intelligence analysts in government departments in their own reports, but the most important point is that we work for private commercial enterprises.

Not only do we not work for the government, but sometimes what we dig up causes considerable embarrassment to it. The best recent example of this is the sad history of the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair, and the role of the American press in them.

Now that most Americans are eager to shake off the miasma of the recent past, they often tend to blame the messenger, the press, for the ill tidings, and that would explain the suspicion and dislike I sometimes find even among my good friends when it comes to any discussion of my work.

Thus it should not come as a surprise to us that an early test of American public opinion in a Harris poll has found that nearly half of those asked thought Nick Daniloff was indeed a spy or at least they were not sure whether he was not. In any case, more than half thought the summit meeting should go ahead even if he were still languishing in a Moscow jail.

In short, in pursuing our profession we risk the mistrust of the public we want to serve, invite the fear of the government of the day, get cajoled and courted by politicos who need us for their electoral success, and, feeling our power, we are often arrogant, demanding special treatment over and above our countrymen.

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Nothing like this could ever happen to a communist journalist, whether working for Soviet, Chinese, Mongolian, Vietnamese, East European, Cuban or Nicaraguan media. Nothing would be farther from his or her mind than working at cross purposes with the government: After all, he or she is a reliable party person, particularly if stationed abroad, and, in most cases in my experience, treading the party line not out of opportunism but deep conviction.

We in the West often have to work against our political instincts or predilections in the pursuit of objective facts. Our colleagues on the other side are faithfully following their ideological convictions that are the same as those of the system they work for: if the facts they dig up support the cause, it is all for the better, and if not, the facts have to be disregarded or shaped to fit the mold.

They never even get close to intelligence work for the very simple reason that they do not have to. In my years at the United Nations, I have often been approached by KGB men, and I liked to cultivate them out of personal curiosity as well as the forlorn hope that I might get something useful out of them. I could afford that because I had no secret or confidential information to divulge, and I enjoyed matching wits in the department of misinformation.

As far as I could tell, no communist colleague of mine would ever think such a thing; in fact, I am sure that if one of them would ever be approached by someone who could be a CIA agent, he would disappear faster from the scene than Charlie Chaplin at his best ever could.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. I would not like to appear to be claiming that we journalists in the West are virtuous by definition, while our counterparts in the communist world are knaves doing the dirty work for their party and system. Far from it. We on both sides of the fence are doing our respective work to the best of our abilities; we all believe, or at least should believe, in what we are doing. The only thing we ask from the Soviet side is to respect our good faith as we are ready to respect theirs.

It does not follow that there cannot be journalistic accommodation between West and East. The Soviet Union needs to have its own press people in the United States, and we want our reporters to work in the Soviet Union. We have put up with all the tendentious reporting done by them from here, presenting their audience with a distorting-mirror image of American life. The least they could do in exchange is to put up with our "spying" on them while there. One thing is sure: There must never be another Daniloff affair if civilized Soviet-American relations are to be continued at all.

Mr. Halasz is a veteran United Nations correspondent.